David versus Goliath in Fairbury

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In 1939, Ray Kroc became the exclusive distributor of the Multimixer milkshake machine. Mr. Kroc became intrigued when he discovered a restaurant in California had purchased six of his devices. Ray Kroc visited the restaurant owned by the McDonald brothers in California. The McDonald brothers had developed a restaurant with a simple menu of burgers, fries, and milkshakes. Ray Kroc liked their business model, and he became the franchise agent for the McDonald brothers. Mr. Kroc opened the first restaurant for McDonald's System, Inc., a predecessor of the McDonald's Corp. in Des Plaines, Illinois, in 1955. In 1961, the McDonald's Corp. bought out the McDonald brothers for $2.7 million. This transaction amount would be equivalent to $23.4 million in today's dollars.

Just one year after Ray Kroc opened his first McDonald's fast-food restaurant in Des Plaines, Illinois, Earl and Dorothy McDonald opened their sit-down restaurant in a rented, white frame building on U.S. Highway 24 in Fairbury. After being in business for 14 years, Earl and Dorothy received their first of many ominous letters from the McDonald's Corp. in 1970. The first letter warned the Fairbury McDonalds never to use arches or switch to a drive-in format.

Eventually, Ronald McDonald, the son of Earl and Dorothy, took over running the Fairbury restaurant. Ironically, the McDonald's Corp. created their clown mascot "Ronald McDonald" in 1963.

After Ronald McDonald and his wife, Sue, took over running the Fairbury restaurant, Ron maintained a folder where he put all the written letters and records of the phone calls that they had received from the McDonald's Corporation. Each communication from the large corporation was meant to strongly remind them of McDonald's corporation's determination to protect its trademark and copyrights.

In the early 1990s, McDonald's Corp. found that the larger American cities were saturated with many different fast-food restaurants. To keep the company growing, McDonald's decided to start opening restaurants in smaller towns.

In January of 1992, things began to get interesting for the McDonald's Fairbury restaurant. A Blade story recounted the old Indian Trail Motel on Route 24 had been sold to the McDonald's Corp, and their trademark "Golden Arches" would be appearing at a new restaurant in Fairbury.

In that era, many different Fairbury community groups held their meetings in the large banquet room in the Fairbury McDonald's restaurant basement. When the Rotary Club had their meeting in the basement, guest speaker Stanley "Stash" Drassler announced he

would be the franchise owner of a new McDonald's restaurant just one mile west of the restaurant he was then sitting in. Mr. Drassler already owned McDonald's outlets in the nearby towns of Watseka and Gilman.

On February 4, 1993, the old Indian Trail motel was demolished. One week later, groundbreaking ceremonies for the future McDonald's fast-food restaurant took place on a cold, windy morning. The Fairbury citizens who attended were Maurice Steidinger, President of the Fairbury Association of Commerce; Lynn Dameron, Fairbury Mayor; Manny Steffen, the realtor who sold the property; and Lucille Steffen, wife of Manny Steffen. Representing the new restaurant's ownership and management were owner Stan "Stash" Drassler and the first manager, Tony Gardner. The McDonald's corporate headquarter's representative was Peggy Kennelly.

About a week after the groundbreaking ceremony, problems with union picketers occurred on the new fast-food McDonald's restaurant's construction site. Union picketers were protesting the use of non-union labor on the construction of the new restaurant. The number of picketers increased to 75 people, and construction was halted. Twenty-one-year old picketer Steve Kupfer, of Eureka, told police that he was struck by the pick-up truck of subcontractor Jeff Kilgus of rural Fairbury. Fairbury Police Chief Sam Hedrick investigated and found that picketers had chased the truck of Kilgus, and one picketer jumped on the hood of the pick-up. Windows were broken on excavation equipment and the construction trailer. Telephone lines to the trailer were cut and spikes placed on the ground.

Eventually, the union picketing issues were resolved, and the restaurant was built. The grand opening ceremony was held on May 25, 1993. The highest-ranking Illinois state official attending the ceremony was Illinois Secretary of State George Ryan. Mr. Ryan went on to become the Illinois Governor in 1998. George Ryan was later convicted of federal corruption charges and spent more than five years in federal prison and seven months of home confinement. He was released from federal prison on July 3, 2013.

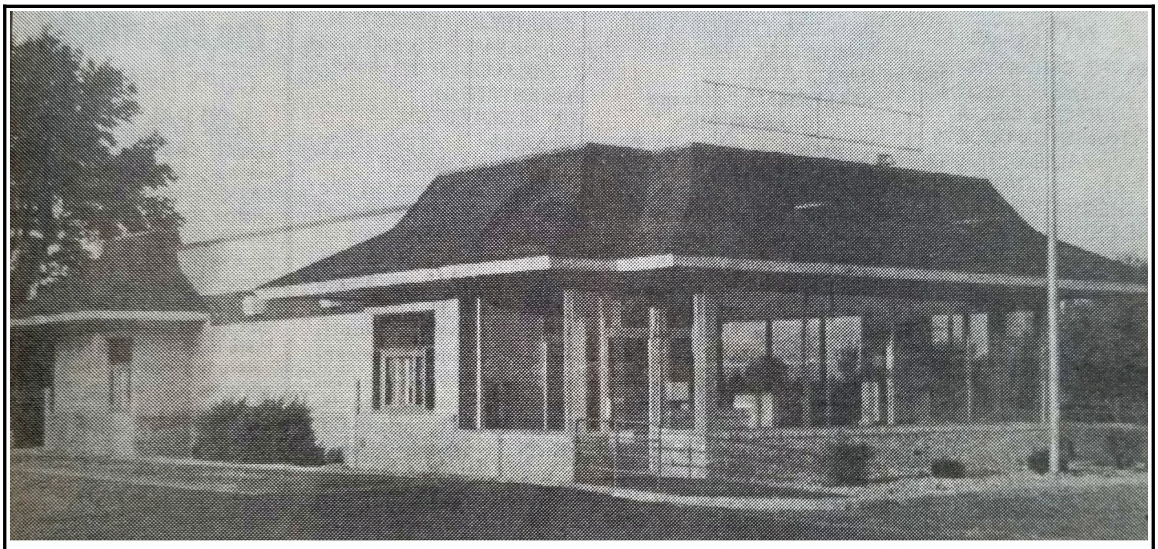
The McDonald's fast-food restaurant had a relatively short life in Fairbury. It closed in July of 1996 after being open for three years and two months. The owner, Mr. Drassler, declined to comment about the reason for closing the restaurant. A McDonald's corporate representative said it was the franchise owner's decision, not the corporation. In that era, very few McDonald's restaurants were closed. Due to the David and Goliath similarity between the small family-owned restaurant and the large corporation, the fast-food restaurant's closing was published in many of the country's major newspapers.

The Chicago Tribune quoted some anonymous Fairbury citizens concerning why the restaurant closed. These citizens told the reporter that the closure was because of a couple of unsavory people who hung out at the restaurant. These unsavory characters drove away local customers. One local observer recounted that "There was this one guy, in particular, a local strongman who is hell for hire and has the body odor to go with it. He drove everybody off." A McDonald's corporate spokesman said the restaurant was not producing enough business. The spokesman said the corporation was not very good at

site selection when they selected Fairbury. The spokesman said the corporation got better over time with regards to successful site selection.

The Fairbury fast-food restaurant building was sold and remodeled into the Fairbury branch of the First State Bank of Forrest. Chenoa announced their new restaurant just two months after the Fairbury restaurant closed.

The McDonald's sit-down restaurant was recently sold, and the name changed to Diner 24. Interestingly, there are still McDonald's fast-food restaurants operating in Watseka, Gilman, and Chenoa.



McDonald’s fast-food restaurant in Fairbury shortly after it closed in 1996. The Golden Arches and other signs were removed within hours of its closure.